

Creating a Professional Identity: A draft professional practice document

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It is important for learning advisors to develop a professional identity, not only to assist us as practitioners, but also to safeguard and promote our status within our institutions. During 2003 and 2004, the Canterbury Tertiary Alliance Learning Advisors group have facilitated discussions amongst tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa NZ aimed at developing a document that encapsulates our professional identity. This paper reports on our progress so far and includes a draft 'professional practice' document which learning advisors may choose to trial and further develop.

The need for a professional practice document

A key milestone in the evolution of any profession is the adoption of a document that encapsulates the group's professional identity. A document that clearly articulates the professional practice of tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand would benefit ATLAANZ members in a number of ways. In essence, a professional practice document would explain our profession to 'outsiders' and, in so doing, safeguard and promote our status within our institutions and the tertiary sector as a whole. Such a document would also provide a useful job description and an induction guide for new colleagues. Arguably the greatest benefit of a professional practice document, though, would be its role in helping tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand develop a clear sense of identity and belonging.

In 2003, members of the Canterbury Tertiary Alliance Learning Advisors group initiated a project to identify the common understandings of professional practice held by tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa NZ. This paper outlines the consensus reached at the 2004 ATLAANZ conference and represents, we hope, a first step towards the development of a formal professional practice document.

Development of the draft document

The draft professional practice document presented here is the result of discussions amongst ATLAANZ members, in a variety of fora, over a period of a year. We began by facilitating a workshop at the 2003 ATLAANZ conference to identify common understandings of the role of a learning advisor (Cameron, Fraser, Looser, & Thorns, 2003). During 2004, we encouraged further discussion within institutions by distributing two discussion documents via the ATLAANZ electronic list (Cameron, Fraser, Looser, & Thorns, 2004a, 2004b). Feedback on those papers, from individual members and teams, was used to revise the 2003 document in preparation for a half-day workshop at the 2004 conference and participants at that workshop further modified the document.

The points agreed were discussed during the final plenary of the 2004 conference. Most of the discussion in this session centred on the status a professional practice document might assume and the need to avoid a prescriptive document while the profession is still relatively young. While there was clear consensus that ATLAANZ was not ready to formally support the development of a professional practice document, most of those present affirmed the value of such a document and supported the trialling of the 2004 draft version within individual institutions.

The outcome of the 2004 workshop and plenary is presented below in three parts: the draft document, which represents the consensus from the discussions and which institutions may choose to adapt and trial; our commentary on the status of this draft; and, in the appendix, an explanation of changes made, and concerns expressed, during the workshop.

Draft professional practice document

1. Principles & values

Learning Advisors value:

- their partnership obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi, Treaty of Waitangi and biculturalism in the Aotearoa New Zealand context
- the principles of equity and equal educational opportunities
- professional and ethical practice
- learner autonomy and lifelong learning
- a student-focused approach, which has regard for students' diverse backgrounds, knowledge, skills, and personal experiences of learning
- fairness, flexibility and open mindedness in their academic and collegial relationships

2. Knowledge, skills and attributes

Learning Advisors:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the metacognitive and learning processes in adult education
- effectively facilitate learning in the adult learning context
- demonstrate qualities of aroha, awhina and manaakitanga
- are committed to their own learning and professional development

3. Roles & responsibilities

a) In our work with students

Learning Advisors facilitate the academic achievement of all students by:

- demystifying the academic system
- helping them to acquire further academic skills
- encouraging them to use strategies to manage their own learning
- encouraging their self-confidence as learners

b) Within our “community of practice”

Learning Advisors:

- engage in reflective practice within institutional teams and within the wider community of learning advisors

c) Within our institution

Learning Advisors:

- complement the work of other academic and general staff
- collaborate with other staff to achieve better outcomes for students
- contribute to the setting of institutional guidelines and work within those guidelines.

4. Practice

Learning Advisors work with students in the following ways:

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(NB. Not discussed during the 2004 workshop; to be completed by individual institutions.)

5. Qualifications / Experience

Learning Advisors

- hold qualifications, or demonstrate competencies, commensurate with the requirements of the position
- preferably have an appropriate teaching qualification and/or relevant experience

The future

In this project, we chose to invite colleagues to develop a new professional practice document for tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand, rather than adapt an existing document from a similar organisation. This decision was partly based on our belief that the Aotearoa New Zealand experience was sufficiently different from that of other countries to warrant developing an ‘endemic’ document. More importantly, we believed that any professional practice document should be inclusive, recognising the diversity of practitioners and settings that are encompassed within the ATLAANZ community. That diversity has been apparent in the discussions that have occurred over the past year, but it is clear there is also a core of common understandings and beliefs about our profession. This draft summarises some of those shared beliefs.

The document is in no way definitive – our discussions about the nature of our professional practice are just beginning. There are aspects that have not yet been considered, such as the impact of new technology on our work, and the need to specify the “modes” in which we work; other aspects, especially the need for qualifications, are still being hotly debated; and colleagues in the Maori caucus, in particular, would like more time to reflect on and discuss the issues in the document.

In an evolving profession such as ours, any professional practice document must be a “living” document that would continually challenge and change. We look forward to this draft serving as a catalyst for that continuing discussion.

References

- Cameron, C., Fraser, C., Looser, F., Thorns, G. (2003). Creating a professional identity. In *Learning talk. Proceedings of ATLAANZ conference, University of Waikato, November 18-20, 2003*.
- Cameron, C., Fraser, C., Looser, F., Thorns, G. (2004a). Creating a professional identity: Discussion document for 2004 ATLAANZ conference. Unpublished manuscript.
- Cameron, C., Fraser, C., Looser, F., Thorns, G. (2004b). Creating a professional identity: Workshop discussion paper. In *Building Bridges: Diversity in Practice, ATLAANZ Conference, New Plymouth, November 16-18, 2004 [CD Rom]*.

Appendix: Feedback from 2004 workshop

2004 draft document (agreed at 2003 workshop & in discussion during 2004)	Feedback from participants during 2004 workshop
General feedback	
	<i>Participants wanted a more concise, specific document written as a series of bullet points</i>
1. Principles & Values	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning is a partnership between the learner and learning advisor. • Learning Advisors are committed to the principle of equal educational opportunities for all. • Learning Advisors support biculturalism in the Aotearoa New Zealand context and the partnership obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi, Treaty of Waitangi. • Learning Advisors promote independence and lifelong learning for the purposes of empowering students to achieve their learning goals and experience success. • Learning Advisors have appropriate regard for every student's particular needs and respect for their background and personal experience of learning. • As professionals, Learning Advisors uphold the integrity of their profession by conducting themselves ethically in all aspects of their practice with students and colleagues. • Learning Advisors apply academic rigour in a fair, flexible and open minded way in their academic and collegial relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Participants felt the word "partnership" was too vague; others felt the partnership included other groups (e.g. the institution) in addition to learning advisor and student. Several wanted the word "trust" included here. (This point was deleted)</i> • <i>Unanimous agreement (Retained)</i> • <i>Unanimous agreement; should be first in list ; te Tiriti o Waitangi should be mentioned before biculturalism (Reworded)</i> • <i>The phrase "learner autonomy" was preferred to "independence". Some participants felt "empowered" was inappropriate because students empower themselves; others believed this word was particularly inappropriate within the Maori context (One participant explained this by saying "You either have mana or you don't") (Revised)</i> • <i>General agreement, but wanted clarification that the "respect and regard" was for the existence of diversity. (Reworded)</i> • <i>Unanimous agreement over sentiment; make more concise. (Reworded)</i> • <i>Disagreement over the use of the term "academic rigour". Some argued for a separate point referring to "scholarship", but there was disagreement over the meaning of this word. (Revised)</i>

2004 draft document (agreed at 2003 workshop & in discussion during 2004)	Feedback from participants during 2004 workshop
2. Knowledge, skills and attitudes/qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the expression “attributes” to be consistent with Min. of Ed. terminology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning advisors should have knowledge of the metacognitive and learning processes and exemplify effective teaching, writing skills, and oral communication skills such as listening and questioning. Professional learning advisors are student focused. They display qualities of empathy, patience and open-mindedness, and non-judgemental attitudes. They demonstrate the necessary skills and knowledge and are committed to life-long learning and professional development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should specifically refer to adult education. Some participants were reluctant to specify which academic skills were required because of the diversity of roles amongst learning advisors and the need to consider sole practitioners; others felt all LAs should model strong communication skills; all felt that knowledge and skills may be demonstrated at the team, rather than the individual, level. “Knowledge” and “skills” need to be separate points. (Revised) It was felt that the Maori concepts of aroha, awhina and manaakitanga better encapsulated these qualities Life-long learning should be a separate point (Revised)
3. Roles & responsibilities	
(a) In our work with students :	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning Advisors have a teaching and learning focus. Their aim is to facilitate the academic achievement of all students. Learning Advisors value students’ existing knowledge, skills and experience. They facilitate students’ own learning development by helping them to acquire further skills and abilities and by demystifying the academic system. These, in turn, give students the confidence to become independent learners. Rather than being prescriptive and directive, advisors use questioning to encourage the student to take control of their own learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unanimous agreement. Remove redundancy. (Reworded) Repeats point in (1) (Deleted) Repetition of first bullet point. Polynesian learning advisors may find the concept of “independent learners” contradicts their value system – they see students as integrated within a system.(Revised) Reference to “questioning” too specific; “learner autonomy” noted in (1) (Deleted)
(b) Within our institution:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The learning advisor both complements the work of other academic and general staff and collaborates with them to achieve better outcomes for students. The form of collaboration differs from institution to institution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unnecessary to note the variation between institutions. (Revised)

2004 draft document (agreed at 2003 workshop & in discussion during 2004)	Feedback from participants during 2004 workshop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The essence of collaboration is good relationships. If these are created then advisors can contribute towards good practice and processes within the institution. They can serve as a source of feedback and feedforward between students and lecturers. Learning advisors need to work within institutional guidelines and have input into the setting of the guidelines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Participants felt it was not necessary to specify the process and rationale for collaboration; most felt it was unhelpful to mention “good relationships” – that collaboration should not be dependent on this. (Deleted)</i> Unanimous agreement (Retained)
(c) Within our “community of practice”:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure best practice, Learning Advisors value reflective practice within teams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise to include inter-institutional collegiality (Revise)
4. Practice	
<p><i>This category was not specifically addressed at the 2003 workshop. The intention is that this category would describe “delivery modes” and might include statements such as “Learning advisors work with students in the following ways ... (e.g. individual consultations, workshops, ...)”.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>There was no time to discuss this during the 2004 workshop</i>
5. Qualifications / Experience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional learning advisors in full time continuing positions should hold a postgraduate degree or be working towards such a qualification. An appropriate teaching qualification, and/or relevant experience, could be a clear advantage. The development of a Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning Advising would provide a valuable qualification and both support and enhance the professional status of learning advisors within their institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>It was felt that there should be no distinction between full- and part-time. Document should include notions of qualifications “appropriate” to role. Including a strong statement on qualifications in the document could help LAs argue for resources (e.g. asking institutions for fees payment, time allocation etc for further study) (Revised)</i> <i>Participants were in favour of this, but felt it was a recommendation and therefore not appropriate in a professional practice document. (Deleted)</i>
6. Theoretical Framework	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>This section was removed from the 2004 conference discussion document following feedback from the consultation round in October 2004. ATLAANZ members felt it would be difficult to reach agreement on this category and that other sections in the framework potentially covered some of this area.</i>

